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Practicing American Studies in an "Age of Fracture": In Search of a Context

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In this paper, I would like to talk about my research field—which is called, alternatively, U.S. diplomatic history, history of American foreign relations, America and the World, United States international history, and so on. As these phrases suggest, at least for the past three to four decades, the field of American diplomatic history—and I use this naming just because it is concise—has been in search of itself—engaging in self-critical, sometimes argumentative, discussions within the field. I have been following these debates with keen interest, because, to me, they can be interpreted as great sources of contemporary intellectual history. Reading these debates I have been exploring what kind of perspectives historians are adopting and in what kind of context the debates are taking place.

There are two things that should be kept in mind. One is that these debates, by and large, have been carried out within the field and among American scholars. The other is that the nature of the debates has changed considerably over forty years or so. So what I would like to do today is twofold. First, I will examine the contexts and perspectives of American diplomatic history writing through my analysis of the debates; and second, I will reflect upon the possibility of re-contextualizing the field of American diplomatic history by locating it within "global" area studies.

I

But first, please allow me to begin by telling you my personal history. This is because I believe, as E. H. Carr has written, that "when we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it."[1] I feel that I have to place myself in a historical

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context.

I consider myself as belonging to the "Vietnam War generation," although some may think that I am a bit too young to be in that category. The reason is that my first exposure to the United States came rather early, in late 1960s. My father was spending a year at Cornell during the academic year 1968/1969 and my family went along with him. As in many other universities across the United States, Cornell was in upheaval then. The university made national news when some of the militant African American students occupied one of its halls, armed, protesting racism on campus and demanding the establishment of an African American Studies program. Obviously I did not understand much of what was happening. But even as a fourth grader, I could feel the tense political atmosphere in the United States as well as the daily "body counts" of the Vietnam War shown on a black and white TV. To me, therefore, the Vietnam War became a reference point from which I could not escape in analyzing the United States and the world.

I also grew up in an era when Japanese politics and diplomacy remained largely subservient to the United States. We still argue, quite correctly, that Japan is dependent on the United States, especially in military and security affairs. But I would argue that this dependency was more salient and pronounced at the time, and triggered deeper emotions, somewhat similar to the sense of frustration now seen predominantly in Okinawa. The cliché was that Japan should not be content to be a junior partner and had to become an equal partner of the United States. And yet it was rare for the Japanese government to contradict the United States, or to cast a vote independently from United States policies in the United Nations. The desire to be independent, but to remain as one of the most trusted allies of the United States at the same time, further deepened Japan's dependency. Thus, while Prime Minister Sato proclaimed that until Okinawa reverted to Japan the postwar era would not end, he nevertheless paradoxically achieved the reversion—a symbol of equality—by ensuring that the United States would keep its bases on the island.

Growing up in such an era, my perceptions of the United States remained ambivalent while I was a student. After choosing American history as my major field, I enrolled in a doctoral program in the United States during the latter half of the 1980s. All the while, I held the assumption that at least in the field of United States history the quality of education in the United States was the best. This was where authentic American history was being taught and since I wanted to compete with my fellow American students on an equal basis, I intentionally avoided utilizing my knowledge of Japan or Japanese in writing my thesis. Looking back I see in my behavior a reflection of the unequal relationship between Japan and the United States. By working on a topic that did not touch upon Japanese foreign

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their invitations and assistance, and to the symposium participants.

1. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 24.

policy I think I was trying not to have my perspective constrained by the troublesome bilateral relationship.

I thus largely avoided pursuing the topic of United States-Japanese relations, but there was one exception. I wrote an article that examined the attitudes of the Japanese intellectuals, including American Studies scholars, journalists and activists during the height of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement.[2] In the mid 1960s to 1970s, numerous articles that analyzed contemporary United States society and politics appeared in journals, weekly and monthly magazines and newspapers. I perused them and the result was quite revealing.

What I found was that there had been a considerable change in the Japanese perceptions of the United States during that time. Up until then, that is, until the late 1960s, the perception of the United States among Japanese intellectuals followed a pattern. According to Kamei Shunsuke, a literary scholar who examined intellectuals in the early 20th century such as Uchimura Kanzo, Nitobe Inazo and Katayama Sen, the perceptions of intellectuals tended to shift from high hopes to bitter disillusionment. Kamei argued that Japanese intellectuals initially expected to see in the United States an ideal country of progress and liberty but, when they actually visited the United States, found themselves confronted by racism, bigotry and inequality. Disillusioned, they ended up rejecting the United States along with its purported ideals. Honma Nagayo presented a somewhat similar argument. He criticized his contemporaries, that is, the New Left in Japan, for denouncing the United States using the "standards" provided by the United States. Those people, according to Honma, assumed that the United States was in its ideal form when it provided Japan with the so-called peace constitution but over time came to denounce it for pressuring the Japanese to violate the constitution. It was "paradoxical," according to Homma, that they had to depend on the standards provided by the United States.[3]

Yet, what I found was that those patterns of disillusionment as described by Kamei or Honma no longer fit many writing during 1960s and 70s. In the context of the protest movement against the Vietnam War and Japan's role in the war, many started to search for a way out of the dichotomy between the desire to see the United States as a model and the inclination to see the United States as betraying its own principles of peace and democracy. What people like Tsurumi

2. Nishizaki Fumiko "Vetonamu sensou, kokujin kaihou undou wo meguru nihon no roncho−1960 nendai kohan kara 1970 nendai ni kakete" [Japanese perceptions of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement − from late 1960s to 1970s] in NIRA Research Report No.940051: *Amerika kenkoku no rinen to nichibei kankei* (Tokyo: National Institute for Research Advancement, 1995), 133.

3. Kamei Shunsuke, *Meriken kara America e: Nichibei bunka koshoshi oboegaki* [From "Meriken" to "America": Notes on the History of Japan-US Cultural Negotiations] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1979); Honma Nagayo, "The Historical Paradox of Japan-U.S. Relations," *Chuo Koron* (December 1967): 50−65.

Shunsuke and Oda Makoto found fascinating in the history of United States was not the glorious ideals enunciated by its leaders but its history of oppression against minorities. And more important, they found in the United States a tradition of dissent against injustice and came to regard this tradition as crucial in preventing American society from becoming complacent and self-laudatory.

II

The turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War enlivened Japanese discussions on the United States foreign policy; the same held true for the United States as well.

One of the reasons that diplomatic historians in the United States have debated extensively the qualities and missions of their work and reflected upon their positions in American society is because American foreign policy itself tended to generate heated debates that questioned, for example, the role of the United States in the world. The debates over the annexation of the Philippines, participation in the League of Nations, and the policies of containment, for example, became intense since, through the debates, people were asking questions such as "who are we?" and debating the principles the United States stood for. Indeed, if history is indeed a dialogue between past and present, as E. H. Carr suggested, then United States diplomatic history must be one of the best examples.[4]

It is no wonder, then, that United States diplomatic history in the 1960s came to be considered as on the cutting edge both in the United States and in Japan. Already in 1959, William Appleman Williams published his seminal work, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, introducing the phrase "Open Door Imperialism." Stimulated by his perspective, younger historians presented the so-called revisionist interpretations of United States history, which also made a deep impact. Walter LaFeber's *The New Empire*, Lloyd Gardner's *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy*, N. Gordon Levin, Jr.'s *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*, Thomas McCormick's *China Market* are the best examples.[5] It was not difficult to identify the context, the perspectives, and the concerns that informed these authors. They considered that the Vietnam War was not an aberration but a climax of the pursuit of open door imperialism that characterized American foreign relations. Although the topics under investigation were historical, the authors were, in a sense, writing contemporary history. In other words, their desire to

4. E. H. Carr, op.cit., 35.

5. William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co, 1959); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963); N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); Thomas McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893–1901* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967).

shed light on the present by exploring the past was the driving force behind their revitalization of diplomatic history. The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) was established in 1967 and the first issue of *Diplomatic History* came out in 1978. The criticism might be made that there was too much "presentism" involved; but it would be difficult to deny that this was an exciting period for diplomatic history.

Despite such auspicious beginnings, diplomatic history quickly became a target of criticism among historians by the end of the decade. Critics suggested it was losing its edge and lagging behind social and cultural history. Writing in 1980 in a book compiled by the American Historical Association, Charles Maier was blunt: "The history of international relations ... cannot, alas, be counted among the pioneering fields of the discipline during the 1970s. At universities and among the educated public that reads and helps to produce serious historical scholarship, diplomatic history has become a stepchild." He then went on to describe in the next thirty plus pages the publications in international history that had come out in the 1970s and surprisingly not all were dismissed outright. Indeed, we recognize in these pages many titles that have since become classics.[6] But, as Maier noted, there were certain indications that the field was "marking time." Why so?

One of the reasons was the rise of the so-called "post revisionism." The stinging critiques of American foreign policy began to subside soon after they gained momentum. John Lewis Gaddis' *The United States and the Cold War*, published in 1972, was an example. Labeled post revisionist by his colleagues, his work was regarded as a "synthesis" of orthodoxy and revisionism. By analyzing domestic policymaking process, Gaddis denied that the primary motivation of the Truman administration was the pursuit of "open door imperialism," arguing instead that it was more in line with the policy of containment. Eventually Gaddis would publish a book entitled *Long Peace*.[7] As the study of the Cold War lost its critical edge, the "Pax Americana" created by the United States began to seem almost benign. Complacency was not conducive to cutting edge history.

Another reason was the lack of creativity in methodology. From its early years, the field of diplomatic history was often considered stuffy and unimaginative. Stories of spies and juicy scandals belonged to the novels and not to academic historical writing. Diplomatic historians would typically dig out dry letters and

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6. Charles Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 355−387.

7. John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); id., *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

telegrams between governments and agencies or public and personal documents of high officials, and then reconstruct complicated deals and intricate negotiations using those documents. They also preferred using vocabularies and phrases that sounded stale—realism versus idealism, domestic sources versus international sources of international relations, force versus statecraft, balance of power, bureaucratic politics and ideology, and the list goes on.

By 1980 all these seemed arcane to many students of history. The influence of the annales school was making an imprint on social history in the United States, and literary theories such as deconstruction, postmodernism and post-colonialism were also exerting a strong influence on historical inquiries. Not all historians appreciated these jargon-filled works, but these new theories did bring an excitement to the field. In the context of these new trends, diplomatic historians, who, in general, shunned gender, culture, race or class as analytical tools—and who sometimes even used "she" as a demonstrative pronoun to refer to a country —appeared irredeemably obsolete.

In order to achieve a breakthrough, there were attempts to apply social science theories to the writing of diplomatic history. Bureaucratic politics, game theory and system theory were some of the preferred theories but most of them remained single works that did not impact the field in general.

Yet another reason for diplomatic history's decline was considered to be the ostensible "parochialism" of the field. Traditionally, diplomatic historians had tended to be more cosmopolitan in their research than those in other fields. Historians who established themselves during the interwar years, for example, Samuel Flagg Bemis and Dexter Perkins, were multilingual and probed archives and documents not only in the United States but also in various other countries in Europe. As the United States became a world power after the Second World War, however, historians began to be immersed in United States archives and started to produce works that focused their attention primarily on Washington, D.C.

Revisionist historians, who were once thought to be on the cutting edge of the field, were no exception. Although critical of United States behavior, many revisionists remained United States centered in their analysis. The main characters in their work were United States policymakers and diplomats and their sources were documents in United States archives. It is telling to note that William Appleman Williams concluded his *Tragedy* with the argument that the United States was betraying the ideals of the founders and that it must reclaim its ideals and promises.

According to historians like Iriye Akira and Charles Maier, this kind of parochial perspective should be overcome in favor of a more internationalist approach to American foreign relations. Later expanded and transformed into various calls for transnational history, comparative history and global history, the need to dispel parochialism and the notion of American exceptionalism became a mantra as American diplomatic historians struggled to find an approach and a

perspective that would bring their field back to the cutting edge of history.[8]

If diplomatic history had entered into a period of stagnation around the turn of the century, apparently things took a turn for the better by 2010. In 2009, Thomas W. Zeiler, a diplomatic historian, published an article reviewing the field in the *Journal of American History* under the title "The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field." Canvassing numerous works produced under the category of diplomatic history in the 1990s and 2000s, he concluded that diplomatic history was back, that it was becoming "a clearinghouse of sorts for work on America in the world."[9]

The reason was twofold: the field was incorporating a wide array of approaches, and internationalization was being undertaken in earnest. Gender, culture, race and *mentalitē* were now taken into account, producing innovative approaches to international relations. Multi-archival research and the use of multilingual sources were now considered *de rigueur* in graduate schools. Indeed, after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars from the United States (who read Russian) flocked to the Soviet archives. For those who were not versed in foreign languages, programs such as the Cold War International History Project at the Wilson Center provided enormous help by translating documents and making them available online. As expected, Zeiler's optimistic evaluation was met with some skepticism. Some thought his argument smacked of a kind of triumphalism. Others argued that he still held on to the assumption that culture and ideology were to be incorporated into the narratives based on power and the state and that the use of the phrase "bandwagon" was not appropriate. Still, looking at the recent issues of *Diplomatic History* one cannot deny that innovative approaches and internationalization have indeed become a norm.[10]

And yet, some fundamental questions remain. Is the diversification of the field opening up new perspectives, and if so, of what kind? In other words, do these new approaches tell us something fundamentally different about United States

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8. Maier, op. cit.; Iriye Akira, "The Internationalization of History," *American Historical Review* 94 (February 1989): 1−10; for the debates among historians, see, Michael J. Hogan, ed. *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941* (Cambridge and NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

9. Thomas W. Zeiler, "The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 95 (March 2009): 1053−1073.

10. Mario Del Pero, "On the Limits of Thomas Zeiler's Historiographical Triumphalism, ibid., 1079−1082; Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "What Bandwagon? Diplomatic History Today," ibid., 1083−1087; Kristin Hoganson, "Hop off the Bandwagon! It's a Mass Movement, Not a Parade," ibid., 1087−1091.

foreign policy? Are multi-archival research and a multilingual approach sufficient to overcome parochialism? How did this new research change the way in which United States based historians perceive the world?

III

These questions were brought to me through my recent experiences working with other area studies specialists in Japan. In 2014, I became a member of the Science Council of Japan. This is an organization similar to the National Academy of Sciences in United States but differs in that it includes among its members scholars from both the social sciences and the humanities. I belong to the committee of Area Studies and am currently chairing a subcommittee consisting of around 20 members in area studies. This, I have found to be quite a daunting task. Not only am I a very new recruit but also I am an Americanist among specialists in East Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East, Europe, Africa, Latin America and Oceania. So far we have organized one symposium entitled "World in Fracture" and are preparing to publish a small book for young readers based on the symposium. Working rather intensely with specialists in other areas, areas that often have borne the blunt of United States power, political, economic, or military, is a little unnerving. I feel quite self-conscious about my own perspectives, whether in terms of discussing current issues in the world or in terms of our academic mores and "standards." In Japanese politics and media, the phrase "international society" is often used interchangeably with the United States. I would like myself to be the last person to make that kind of mistake.

Challenging though it may be, the opportunity to work with other area studies specialists has made me aware of several things. One of them is the necessity that American studies scholars in and out of the United States listen to the questions raised by the people outside the field.

Excepting American studies, we know that area studies often arose from strategic interests, for example, the need to study "potential enemies" and "occupied territories." This holds true for both the United States and former imperialist countries like Britain, France and Japan. In the United States during the Cold War, funding was provided to promote research that supported various government and non-government programs, such as providing aid to underdeveloped countries, planning for covert operations to counter guerrilla forces, or building a broader agenda for nation building. Investigating the roles of area studies in United States foreign policy, I think, is indeed an important research topic in diplomatic history.

We also have to keep in mind that these research projects, precisely because they are expected to serve certain political agenda, are inherently in danger of producing results that are self-serving. Since funding is provided according to the projects' usefulness for particular policies, it will be difficult to raise fundamental

questions that may derail the policies themselves. Therefore, there is always the risk that the funders will be obtaining policy recommendations that they were expecting to receive from the very beginning. To limit the agenda of a research in order to conform to a policy objective run the risk of producing self-serving results leaving fundamental questions unanswered.

The problem confronting scholars in American studies is not exactly the same, but the need to liberate and contextualize one's perspectives would apply to them as well. And one suggestion that I would like to make is to listen to other area studies specialists in and out of the United States and to take in the questions that those researchers are asking. There are many questions—why does President Obama repeat that the United States can no longer be the world's policeman when many in the world would contest the assumption that the United States has acted as the world's policeman up until today? Why is the urge to look back upon the war in Iraq and Afghanistan so weak compared with the intense self-criticism that broke out after the Vietnam War? Or the ultimate puzzle for many non-Americans —why can't the United States legislate gun control? Some of the questions may sound ideological to many in the United States but they are raised sincerely and intensely around the world nonetheless.

As mentioned earlier, historians of American foreign relations have engaged in heated debates over the state of their field but very few among them have advocated the need to listen to the questions generated from outside. They have been trying to internationalize and are diligently digging up archival sources around the world, including those in the former Soviet Union and Asia. But aside from a few notable exceptions, people are not very interested in what is being discussed outside the United States. That makes them a little like "predators" in search of treasure. It is well to remember here that the two comments on Zeiler's paper which questioned the phrase "Diplomatic History Bandwagon." Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht pointed out that there was a considerable lack of interest in works not written in English and that the field was still centered on the *American* state and the *U.S.* power. Kristin Hoganson urged the readers to hop off the bandwagon, arguing that what was needed was not the reaffirmation of diplomatic history but the nurturing of the intellectual space to accommodate a wide range of perspectives.[11] These comments suggest that despite consistent efforts to diversify and internationalize the field, there is still much to do in order to overcome the parochialism that was pointed out over three decades ago.

IV

As I stated, I have been following the debates among diplomatic historians

11. Gienow-Hecht, op. cit.; Hoganson, ibid

over the past three decades with keen interest. Looking back I realize how the context in which those debates took place has changed over time—from the intensification of the Cold War to the prolongation of the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War and the coming of the age of "globalization." Accordingly the terms of the debates have changed considerably as well. No longer do the debates over United States diplomatic history hinge upon the question of "who we are." In other words, fewer people are asking grandiose questions such as "what the United States stands for" or "what constitutes American identity and American principles." As methodology diversified and weariness over the hyperactive role of the United States in the world built up, many historians came to choose more nuanced and less state-centered approaches. Narratives became more multifaceted and multilayered.

Such developments can probably be considered as an aspect of the "Age of Fracture," about which Daniel Rogers has argued so persuasively. Through an analysis of economic theories, identity politics, historical memories and social policies, Rogers argued that American society started to fragment around the 1980s.[12] It may be that the field of diplomatic history, despite its emphasis on transnational, international, and global approach, is undergoing fragmentation as well. And at the same time there is a need to realize that the age of fracture is also entangled with the age of globalization. Things that divide and fracture, such as inequality, nationalism, exclusiveness and disenfranchisement, can be observed globally today.

That again reminds us of the need to search for a context. After declining to hop on the bandwagon, what are the contexts in which those historians are organizing their thoughts? Even in an age of fracture, is it not necessary to find a context within which we can continue our exploration and carry on our dialogue among ourselves and with scholars in other fields?

As a start, I would like to suggest that those engaged in writing history in and out of the United States, become once again conscious of their perspectives and the context in which they are undertaking their historical inquiry. Thanks to the collective efforts of all who have engaged in the various debates, we are able to question and reclaim our perspectives more freely, not necessarily constrained by our nationality, society, gender, race or other "attributes." Which makes us, as individuals, responsible to find our own perspectives in the context of our own choosing. It may be a challenge, but it will certainly be more worthwhile than trying to search for the bandwagon of our time.

12. Daniel T. Rogers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).